

Von Dohnanyi helps CSO create a Mahler to remember

May 8, 2004

BY [WYNNE DELACOMA](#) Classical Music Critic

Resting on laurels is a position few internationally renowned maestros prefer, even when they move into their 70s, as Christoph von Dohnanyi has done, having accepted the title of music director laureate of the Cleveland Orchestra in 2002 after 17 stellar seasons with that distinguished ensemble.

Within nanoseconds, it seemed, after relinquishing full-time responsibility for the Cleveland Orchestra's artistic direction, von Dohnanyi was popping up as guest conductor on the world's major podiums. He conducted the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in fall 2002 and returned to Symphony Center Thursday night for a set of concerts featuring music of Arvo Part, Prokofiev and Mahler. Next season he will conduct Beethoven's "Fidelio" at Lyric Opera.

One of the many remarkable elements of von Dohnanyi's musicmaking, whether he is conducting at the world's great summer festivals or in leading opera houses and concert halls, is his abiding interest in works outside the standard canon. In 2002, he led the CSO in a program of Charles Ives and Witold Lutoslawski as well as Brahms. Thursday's concert opened with "Fratre," a haunting piece from 1977 for solo violin, string orchestra and percussion by Estonian composer Arvo Part, before moving on to first symphonies by Prokofiev and Mahler.

Audiences and orchestral musicians expect great things when a conductor of von Dohnanyi's stature is on the podium, and he delivered Thursday night. Last week, another senior maestro, Mstislav Rostropovich, conducted the CSO in a searing performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10. Mahler's Symphony No. 1 under von Dohnanyi's baton was similarly memorable.

This was not Mahler on an epic, world-gobbling scale but something more defined yet equally powerful. The mordant rustling in the symphony's opening bars was often assertive, evoking the resolute force of spring flowers fighting to break the earth's surface rather than the mysterious stirring of inchoate, primal forces.

The clarity of texture that von Dohnanyi emphasized throughout the evening cast individual sections of the orchestra in especially high relief during the Mahler symphony. When the violins swept into their lyrical song in the opening movement, the sound was both delicate and ebullient. The second movement's hearty dances, driven by rough-hewn double basses and cellos, had a suave lilt as well as zesty drive. The timpanis' ominous, spectral whispers in the third movement's funeral march set the stage for the final movement's controlled chaos. Von Dohnanyi didn't allow the CSO brasses to bray, but their more disciplined, leaner line made their joyful song even more exultant. Sacrificing not an iota of excitement, von Dohnanyi and the responsive CSO channeled Mahler's expansive symphony into streamlined, highly charged drama.

Yuan-Qing Yu, a CSO assistant concertmaster, was soloist in Part's "Fratres," originally scored for string and wind quintets and later arranged by the composer for various ensembles. Part has become known as one of the so-called "mystical minimalists" because of his fascination with repetition and simple musical structures including medieval chant.

"Fratres" was a beautiful study in urgency and serenity. Yu's violin was frequently a nervous, anxious traveler, her tiny musical motifs pushing and racing against the slower, unruffled string orchestra and percussion. Crisp and elegantly phrased, her performance was eloquent and full of sensitive conversation between soloist and orchestra.

Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1 brimmed with effervescent high spirits.

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019
Tel: 212.757.0782 • Fax: 212.541.5179
E: nycolbert@colbertartists.com
Web: <http://www.colbertartists.com>